

HOMELESS GRANT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (HGAP) 2008 PROJECT DOCUMENTATION

Thurston County – Empowering Change through Housing Opportunities (ECHO)

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CONTEXT

Thurston County has a long history of regional coordination of public and private collaboration on housing and homelessness issues, going back to the creation of the Thurston County Housing Task Force in 1987. In 2002, representatives from the County and several cities jointly applied for HOME funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). At that time, the Thurston County HOME Consortium prioritized reducing homelessness in the county by 50 percent by 2005. Point-in-time counts have shown that they were able to meet that goal.

With the passing of the State Homelessness Housing and Assistance Act (2163), communities were challenged with reducing homelessness by at least 50 percent over the next ten years. The Thurston County HOME Consortium embraced this goal again, and its Homeless Planning Workgroup developed the *Ten-Year Homeless Housing Plan for Thurston County* in 2005. The Ten-Year Plan identifies key gaps in the homelessness system, and strategies to fill those gaps.

A key gap in the system was the lack of resources to meet the needs of homeless youth and young adults, with an estimated 200 youth homeless at any given time in the county. The plan identified 27 existing transitional housing units for homeless youth provided by Community Youth Services, serving about 78 youth and young adults annually. To meet the remaining need, the plan recommended the development of 100 new housing units for homeless youth and young adults, including 24 low-barrier units. These housing units were to include appropriate levels of support services, and to be available to youth transitioning from public institutions such as foster care, chemical dependency treatment, hospitals, or the criminal justice system.

PROJECT HISTORY

Thurston County applied for HGAP funding in the Spring 2008 round, and was successfully awarded funding in June 2008 for the Empowering Change through Housing Opportunities (ECHO) program. The County subcontracted overall implementation of ECHO to Community Youth Services (CYS), which began operating and enrolling clients on October 1, 2008.

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The ECHO program was designed to address the unmet need for low-barrier housing by providing transitional housing and services for homeless young adults (ages 18 to 23). The priority populations for ECHO include young adults who are exiting the corrections system, who are pregnant or parenting, who are involved with or at risk of involvement with Child Protective Services, and/or who have behavioral health needs. These clients are usually the hardest to serve because of their multiple barriers to stable housing. The goal of the ECHO program is to help these young adults successfully move into and prepare to succeed in permanent housing.

CURRENT ACTIVITY

CYS hired staff and enrolled clients gradually throughout the fall of 2008. By January 2009, the program was fully staffed, enrolled at full capacity, and started a waitlist for potential clients. Most client referrals come through public institutions, as intended, or for young parents who are involved with Child Protective Services.

Case managers work with a part-time mental health coordinator to extensively assess each potential ECHO participant. Through its other programs, Community Youth Services learned that homeless young adults often do not present all their issues until several months into transitional housing due to their experiences coping on the street or in institutions. The ECHO program's mental health coordinator is available on-site to provide support for the case managers in assessing client needs and finding appropriate services for them. This position has been important to the program as other sources of funding for mental health services are declining.

The case managers create an individual service plan (ISP) with each client and connect them to the needed services to address the goals of the ISP. Such services may include mental health services, chemical dependency services, family counseling, life skills training, pre-employment training, job placement services, and/or renter education certification. Participants with children also participate in Parents as Teachers trainings on-site at CYS. The employment specialist works with clients to develop job readiness and find appropriate employment opportunities. The housing specialist works with clients to find housing on-site at CYS or through private-market landlords. Some clients are able to access rental subsidies from sources besides HGAP, and the housing specialist helps place them in housing, as well.

OUTCOMES AND PROGRESS

The early implementation of the ECHO program has demonstrated successes as well as some challenges. The program has particularly seen excellent progress for several individuals who have made significant progress toward housing stability and even enrolled in college classes. There has also been early success in reaching out to local landlords and engaging them in the program. Landlords have been very satisfied by

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the program, and are eager to take more clients. Landlord outreach has also exposed more community members to the Thurston County Ten-Year Plan.

CYS has been pleasantly surprised by the strong relationships between the ECHO program and criminal justice and law enforcement agencies. For clients enrolling from correctional programs, case managers encourage them to pursue restorative justice by identifying how their past actions may have harmed other individuals and making amends where possible. ECHO staff have regular meetings with the Department of Corrections community corrections staff, probation officers, and the Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration to keep them informed about the program. Local police have also learned about ECHO, and reported that they have learned a great deal about homeless youth from ECHO. One local police officer requested that CYS provide more trainings for police staff to improve their knowledge.

One initial challenge was that CYS has never engaged in a formal program evaluation before, and had delays in finalizing the contract with their outside evaluator. ECHO staff were able to connect with another HGAP grantee about their existing evaluation, and expect to begin the evaluation this spring.

PROJECT TIMELINE

2002	Creation of Thurston County HOME Consortium and its goal to reduce homelessness by 50 percent by 2005
2005	State Homelessness Housing and Assistance Act (2163) passed
Fall 2005	<i>Ten-Year Homeless Housing Plan for Thurston County</i> developed by the Homeless Planning Workgroup of the Thurston County HOME Consortium
January 2008	HGAP releases 2008 HGAP RFP
April 2008	Thurston County submits HGAP application
June 2008	Thurston County ECHO program is successfully awarded HGAP funding
October 2008	ECHO program client intakes begin
January 2009	Program at full capacity and fully staffed